SCIENCE FICTION

Though this is fictionalized science, it’s not science fiction.

We’ve imagined some of the details, but the characters existed,
and did and said (most of) the things you’ll read.

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PROLOGUE: 1944, NEAR LOS ALAMOS, NEW MEXICO.

RUSTLE

RUSTLE

RARF!
RARF!

KRAK!!
WHAT HAPPENED?

SHHHH!

WHAT?

SOMEONE JUST TRIED TO GET INTO BUILDING OMEGA... [%20]

I SCARED HIM OFF!
SAFECRACKER

PART ONE:
A VERY GOOD SCHEME.
Leo Lavatelli taught me how to pick locks.

CLICK CLICK

Sometimes you slip, and have to start over again.

CLICK CLICK

It's like Sisyphus: you're always falling down hill.
It's a simple process, but practice helps a lot.

People are always locking themselves into things, but it's not very hard to pick them.

For example at Los Alamos in the '40s...

When we started working on the atomic bomb, everything was in a hurry.

Including the file cabinets, everything about the atomic bomb was in 'em, and they were easy as pie to open.

Nothing was really ready.

Los Alamos was a cooperative place... we all had the right to criticize each other and the system, because we were working together.

You say these were unsafe... can you open the cabinet now?

Here's a hole for the support rod. What if I push it through from the back?

These don't even have solid bottoms!
Finally, some cabinets with combination locks came from the Mosler Safe Company.

Now that's a filing cabinet! I hope I get one!

They were an immediate challenge. Having trouble, Feynman?

I love puzzles, so I took apart the one in my office.
I didn't get anywhere, so I bought some books by safecrackers.

They were all the same.

In the first part they told stories of their fantastic achievements.

In the second part, they told you how.

Ninny-pinny, dopey things.

"Think of the psychology of the owner."

"Lots of people like to use dates for combinations."

"The secretary might write it down in one of the following places..."

They couldn't have opened safes at any speed with that crap.

I went back to my own studies.
I discovered that the mechanism wasn't precise, so you only had to be near each number.

I only had to try every fifth number, or only 20 for each position. That's 8000 possible combinations instead of 1,000,000!

With practice, I could choose my first number and then try the 400 back numbers in ½ hour. That meant I could open a safe in a maximum of 8 hours, with an average time of 4 hours!

It took me a year and a half to get this far...

...of course, I was working on the atomic bomb, too.
STALEY WILL LOVE THIS!

HEY, STALEY! LET’S GO TO THE COMPUTING DEPARTMENT...

... I HAVE A WAY OF OPENING SAFES IF YOU KNOW THE FIRST NUMBER,

HEY, EVERYBODY! FEYNMAN’S GONNA SHOW STALEY HOW TO OPEN A SAFE.

DIS I GOTTA SEE!

HAHAHA

SUPPOSE THE FIRST NUMBER IS 40, AND WE’RE TRYING 15 FOR THE SECOND NUMBER. WE TAKE THE WHEEL TO HERE FOR THE THIRD NUMBER. BACK TO HERE, AND SO ON.
Now we try 20 for the second number. We take the wheel to here, and back to here, and...

Click!

And there you are!
Holy cow! He did it!

I see what you mean. It's a very good scheme.

It was pure luck, but I pretended it was no big deal, and Stailey played along.

My reputation as a safecracker bordered on the supernatural after that.

Continued...